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WHAT AM I DOING AGAIN?

Megan Coonelly

24 Pages

My work explores notions of habits, chaos and distractions; present within my painting practice. Each painting I make begins with a routine that symbolizes the daily experiences of my life. My paintings reflect the constant thought stream of my mind. They reveal the constant of societal and cultural past and present; buried as deep in our minds as a prayer or hymn ready to burst out at any moment. By referencing and exploring pop culture and pop art, I engage in a critique of commodity and commercialism. My paintings respond to cultural conditions of the digital age.

KEYWORDS: Fine Arts, Painting

WHAT AM I DOING AGAIN?

MEGAN COONELLY

A Thesis Supportive Statement in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

School of Art

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WHAT AM I DOING AGAIN?

MEGAN COONELLY

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For my Ellie and Gene - I am lucky to have two sons!

For my Mother and Father and their unwavering faith in my abilities.

To my committee thank you for all of your help and influence over my work these past three years. I am proud of the work I have produced and know it will continue to thrive post-graduate.

M. C.

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CHAPTER I: PRELUDE

You are praying the rosary but your thoughts leave the Hail Marys, and you hear Dana Carvey, as the character Garth Algar from Wayne's World, speak: "Did you ever find Bugs Bunny attractive when he would dress up as the girl bunny?" I've never been a smoker, but I want to try. You could die, and the fad has faded, but I wanted to try. Soda is bad for you, but I'll still drink it from time to time, even if it can clean a grill. Smoke and drink and then go for a run. Push yourself further. When is the new Bill and Ted movie coming out? These kids really love avocados. I really didn't think I would love avocado toast as much as I do. Do not watch too much TV, but Netflix has so many good shows and is bringing back so many others. I can go on YouTube and look up old movies and clips. Thanks to Hulu I can watch all 300 plus episodes of South Park. Great, now I have the Russell Crowe song in my head. "Making movies, making songs, and fightin' round the world."

CHAPTER II: HABITS, CHAOS AND DISTRACTIONS THROUGH PAINTING

My work explores the habits, chaos and distractions presented through the process of painting. Each painting begins with a routine that symbolizes the daily and the everyday of my life. It reflects the constant thought stream of my mind. They are reflective of the constant influence of culture past and present; buried as deep in our minds as a prayer or hymn, ready to burst out at any moment.

Rituals and habits are developed from birth. Mothers enforce a feeding and bedtime ritual. This ritual for the child in turn becomes a routine for the mother. Schooling creates another ritual as you age. You arrive at the same time every day and you leave at the same time almost every day. Classes are structured using the same daily timeline. These regimes leave little room for spontaneity and routines can form as both good and bad habits. Two instances of such behaviors are brushing your teeth every morning, or taking that smoke break after the ten o'clock production meeting.

I am interested in all sorts of habits, and these play out in my work. They show up as painted imagery. These images overlap and intertwine, in obvious and less obvious ways, utilizing the techniques of thick paint or thin paint. In my work I look to a variety of habits, routines and rituals as to inform the performance of painting. My painting reflects upon habits I have whether they be religious, athletic or edible. The habit becomes a singular thought to hold onto during the making of a painting.

I use imagery to focus my attention on the act of painting as a method of daily reflection. The images used are ones I am very critical of. I reflect upon the implications the images suggest in the painting. I find myself critical of these images as I also find myself having a secret need of wanting these spoils. These images are rooted in advertisement and I mock and

analyze these images as I paint. The paintings allow me to exert control over my thoughts and participation in these images in a reverent and irreverent way.

CHAPTER III: RITUALS AND ROUTINES

My upbringing was surrounded by many religious rituals. I attended Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. My family headed to church every Sunday, and on Tuesdays I would attend the novena masses with my mother. These rituals occurred every week and were permanently engraved on my weekly schedule. Religious imagery is ingrained in my memory after decades of worship, and it will always hold a place in my mind. I am consistently reminded of the Stations of the Cross, etched into the windows of Saint Timothy Catholic Church.

My spiritual upbringing has been a source of internal struggle at times. I often found myself pondering why anyone didn't find it strange when Jesus claimed bread to be "his body?" No one cracked a joke? No one thought maybe he was beginning to fall off this rocker? No one thought maybe claiming to be the "Son of God," was going a tad too far? While I would refer to myself as a Catholic by faith, there are certain aspects I question.

Hygienic routines are established before we can even hold our heads up. Brushing our teeth, changing our underwear daily, and washing our hair and showering are ingrained in our being. These actions are considered the standard of basic cleanliness. I remember when a study was produced indicating it was better for hair not to be shampooed daily. People were in disbelief because it went against their basic principles of cleanliness. I liken this to the coffee is good/is not good for you research. The how clean is too clean; the what if I don't floss and get a cavity personal dilemmas of the mind. These thoughts consist of a daily routine and carry many health implications. They are more of a physical need than a spiritual need. You can forget to go to mass on a holy day, but if it's an honest mistake- the church claims you are saved by Jesus. If you forget to brush your teeth for a week- you could welcome the gum disease gingivitis.

Keeping a healthy routine that involves exercise maintains a healthy body. Exercise is a habit and routine that can also manifest in a spiritual. I find running to be meditative in nature. There are these moments in running a race, or taking your daily run, where the mechanisms of the body take over and you hit autopilot. You know the terrain and you've been running the same terrain for years. The world seems to melt away and you can focus on the real important things in life: what am I wearing tonight?

Smoking, even after research proved how deadly it was for the body, still appealed to consumers through clever, sexually provocative advertising. The bad suddenly became a necessary want for the consumer. It was glamorous to smoke and even while the advertising has diminished, cigarette companies still have a consumer market. This is similar to the consumption of soda. Sure, it can clean a BBQ grill, but the fizz in my mouth is glorious. Is it Pepsi or Coke? Pepsi has gone back to the original formula. Coke is using new sugar. Taste the difference.

Then there are our basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. Humans cannot survive without nourishment, we cannot weather a storm without shelter, and with no clothes on our back we are sure to succumb to the elements. These needs are necessary for survival and almost invisible to those who easily have access to all three.

CHAPTER IV: COMMERCIALISM OF ROUTINES

While we could live on considerably less, society dictates a commercial want for more material goods. You could have a grilled cheese for lunch. You could also make the grilled cheese on artisan bread, with avocado and chimichurri. You could also get the 24K gold, grilled cheese found at the Chicago Ritz Carlton for \$100.00. In no way is a literal golden grilled cheese necessary, but that does not mean it is not intriguing enough not to eat. *I'm eating gold! I can afford to eat gold!*

Shelter is necessary to survive the elements, storms, and to protect us from wildlife. I currently live in a two bedroom apartment which houses myself and my children. It keeps us safe. It is exactly enough space. Would we enjoy more space? Very likely. But is it necessary? Not really. As long as I can provide adequate shelter to my children it should be enough to survive in the elements. Advertisements and even news stations will advertise homes for sale having large yards and pools. *Pools! A swing set! Good schools! It is necessary to buy this home now!*

Clothing is the most commercial of basic needs. I should be satisfied with a shirt on my back, shoes on my feet, and pants covering my bottom, nonetheless when I open any magazine or turn on any TV show and I am engrossed in fashion. *What sunglasses are in style this season? What is new for fall holds no value during the spring season for the most conscious in fashion. Get your Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel on right away! Make sure you pay \$500.00 for a Burberry umbrella because when it rains outside everyone can see your success. The desire melts off the product.*

No matter how focused a person is, thoughts of the day creep into the mindset of every individual. Distraction is an everyday occurrence and no matter how anchored the thought or

action is, the mind is never silent. Culture today constantly bombards us with advertisement and a constant variety of entertainment in the form of movies, television, and music. The internet has made the immediate accessibility to media a reality. People try to find moments of silence in our morning coffee, afternoon smoke, drink or prayer; however, how achievable is this notion? Society is blessed with the constant connectivity available through our phones, the internet, and phones equipped with the internet. Is true freedom of thought really achievable in this day and age? Scenes of television shows, or storylines of books can play on repeat in our minds. Jingles from commercials, both present and past, can play on repeat in your mind for hours. Information is ready and accessible at our fingertips at all times.

If you are a parent, the constant stream of daily responsibilities flood your mind. *Are the kids feeling alright? What did they eat today? What bills are due?*

Right now, our basic needs and tastes are directed towards a desire for "good" health.

By focusing on these desires and routines in my paintings I am creating my own advertisement of the daily consumptions and necessities we are bombarded with that are so natural and every day in our society.

What's the newest diet fad? Everyone has a gluten intolerance now. Rice flower, rice pasta, and a variety of grains have become the necessity of a "good" diet. Spaghetti squash, not spaghetti. No more carbohydrates. The desire for fast food has left the common consumer. No more McDonald's, Pizza Hut or Dominos on a Friday night. It's a "Plated Night." You are sent a box of ingredients to make a fancy meal you would not have thought up on your own. It's healthy, it's unique, and you are part of the experience. Or you go to a gastropub, or a farm to table restaurant. There are twelve types of nut-butter at the store. Online stores have found success offering fifteen types of plain tee-shirts. It's the essential tee-shirt. The perfect tee-shirt.

You can get shoes delivered to your home every month. You can even have your underwear mailed to you each month, and athletic wear. Perhaps we have entered a time of too much variety, while other companies have focused their statement to know you, as their client, and you choose an option out of five each month. With so many options, how can we really, truly find what's best for ourselves when the store is now determining they know your tastes.

This constant bombardment of advertisement, and commodity masked as a standard routine has been ingrained subconsciously to influence the culture and mindset of anyone. Being a product of the digital age has opened the doors for cleverly disguised advertising and subliminal tactics masquerading as daily necessity. The paintings reflect this bombardment in the imagery depicted. These images can act as the routine, or the “distractive” imagery in the paintings.

CHAPTER V: "DISTRACTIVE" IMAGES

I become distracted when I make paintings, just as with anything. I have harnessed this ability as a process in my paintings. While I paint these distracting thoughts as images or text as they creep in. I attempt to keep the representation as organically honest to the transpiring thought. When the thought becomes active and pushes to the forefront of my consciousness, I paint it until I can refocus onto the original subject of the painting. I attempt to refocus and carry the painting along, regardless of how distracted I become during the process. This attempt is usually successful, until the next distraction materializes in my mind.

"Distractive" images that enter my work arise from a broad sense of what can plague our senses in even the most focused of meditative rituals. This could be a scene replaying in your mind from something you watched last night or even last year. It could be a smell, while running, that triggers a memory of a meal from childhood. Because the thoughts come to the forefront of your conscience, the object, person, or phrase become painted. While you may want the focus to be on the ritual and its action, your mind wanders to the distraction. This causes a new network of associations, unrelated but becoming linked by "distracted" associations. Some thoughts even form a logical stream from one subject to another. For example, if you are thinking about how you will do your hair, it makes sense you would then begin to think about makeup, clothes, and shoes, etc. The larger the distraction, the larger the image is that disrupts or is added to the painting. It shows more prominence as the thought disturbs the current activity. It can overshadow action in many situations. The distracted image can even overshadow the main image in the painting.

Whatever the initial thought process was is now completely de-railed by this current image and thought. Why would a quote from Wayne's World pop into your mind as you are

praying? What portion of the Hail Mary screams for Garth Algar and the quote during that particular scene? It is not just a joke, but a manifestation of fact. The fact is that even with conscious action in my routine of the painting process, thoughts creep into the work. This is not just a conscious effort based on humor, but a representation of any meditative routines.

CHAPTER VI: PROCESS

Each painting begins with a large canvas. The minimum scale for these paintings are 48"x72" to really allow the brush strokes to have a commanding role in the paintings. This large scale allows me to utilize my entire physical body to paint, becoming a physical workout for me to create the painting. I am emulating a dance in paint, where I am the performer and there is no audience. To truly enact this activity a large canvas is needed to highlight the mark making in the image. If a smaller canvas were used, it would be constrained in palette and mark making. It would not allow for a brush mark to breathe. The large canvases help emphasize the use of a large, loose brush which works to exemplify the swiftness of the painting process. The canvases are larger than I am in scale, they envelop me and not the other way around. The canvas requires participation to be painted with physical activity. The flexibility of the paint and allowing it to splash and drip, adds to the fast hand to in which I paint. If the thoughts are rushed this, is reflected in the brush marks on the canvas.

The three essential topics in my paintings are reflected in these basic need: spiritual nourishment, hygienic maintenance, and a control of habits.

Each habit, ritual, and routine image chosen is started by pre-mixing a palette of the essential colors needed to truly reflect the image. Each color is pre-mixed and set on my palette using cups. I keep other colors nearby to tweak the main palette as indicated by the progression of the painting. I like to block in large shades of color first. I create a loose, watered down underpainting at first to measure out the initial image onto the canvas. As the painting progresses, more opaque layers of color are added in larger areas. The distractions are added as they become conscious in my mind. They manifest in larger, sometimes less worked areas of the painting. I go back to completing the original image as I refocus my mind on the ritual. I use

mediums or add water in with certain colors during this process to spread the color over the larger space. The paints' added liquidity allows the paint to take on a life of its own in drips and stains.

I use a variety of brush sizes and textures to create many different brush marks. The softer bristles allow a smoother defined line, where as a brush with the rougher bristles creates a texture within the brush mark.

These paintings begin with a carefully selected image representing a routine. These painting serve as a performance piece in paint, to create a routine thought and image onto canvas before it is lost to other thoughts and distractions. When the routine is inevitably disrupted the initial image is interrupted, and the new imagery or desire is now the center thought. This thought becomes painted either in haste or as a new conversation within the painting.

I try to choose an image to best represent a ritual, routine, or habit. I reflect upon a statue of Mary to reflect my spiritual rituals. She is repeated in a linear form to reflect the act of praying to her. Each prayer is identical in phrase though the intention may change each time it is prayed to her.

I chose images to reflected a similarity of activity in pose reflecting a consuming a product of bodily consumption in the images of the smoker and the soda drinker. While it is two different actions, they mirror each other and compositionally highlight their sameness. The models are even dressed alike wearing large sunglasses to mask their true identity. The mouth remains in the center of the composition emphasizing its importance in the layout of the advertisement. *They could be you; you want them to be you.* You are either the female consuming the object, or perhaps you want to be with her in your romantic mindset. The swimmers are reflected to show the hygienic need of society. The basic need to keep healthy and

fit in physique. Staying athletic and fit is important to cultural society today and it is not just enough to be thin.

The distracted imagery comes from my subconscious and is painted sometimes symbolically or from a photo reference. It occurs in the paintings quite randomly and derails the focus of the original image. While I should focus on my hygienic routine, I am thinking about the dates my thesis and paper works are due this semester. Those dates are then painted onto the canvas as the thought enters my mind. These dates take the attention away from the swimmers, until I forcibly reflect back on the original thought. These pieces of imagery utilize an image library to symbolize the recurring thoughts of my day. *My children are a constant distraction. What have they eaten today? What books are they enjoying recently? Thoughts of avocados dance in my brain. Then the every daunting question, who pooped? This is reflected as I paint a diaper on the painting.*

Routines, and rituals can be hard to stick with throughout the day. You can become derailed from any activity by a phone call, or an illness. A break in the routine or ritual can derail the activity for a week or even years. You can miss mass on Sunday, and since you weren't struck down by the hand of God, maybe you miss it the next week as well. Soon the ritual can begin to unravel and it is no longer essential to your weekly routine.

The satisfaction in the paintings comes in the act of painting. The performance of the painting is a disrupted meditation that can make me laugh, or leave me frustrated. It catalogs my thoughts in paint and the chaos of my painting practice, and life as a single mother. There is no real completion to any of these paintings. Each painting captures a period of time in a diary or journal-like way.

I hope for my audience to take away something from this experience of a daily life, though it is only a small, sliver of a singular life created on canvas, for view in my world. Perhaps they will find a connection in the similarity of their own routines, rituals and habits. The viewer should feel consumed by their presence given the large scale of the paintings. They should enter the painting confused and slowly be find the poise within each painting.

CHAPTER VII: PAINTINGS

The six panel painting, "Somethings You Can Do with Your Mouth", initially draws upon the habit of smoking and drinking Pepsi. These modern, classic, bad habits were once sexualized in advertising and hold the focus of the painting. I chose these two images which show a woman, similarly composed in within each advertisement, dressed in sunglasses, holding a long rectangular straw or cigarette in her mouth. I chose two images to rotate per panel because I wanted this to be a multi-paneled painting.

I was focused on the act of painting the habit when I began each panel; however, certain thoughts kept distracting me during their creation. These thoughts included much reference to avocados because my children have a taste for avocados and I incorporated that reference into the painting. That morning I additionally found ten dollars, in quarters, on the ground. That reference also require incorporating in the painting. The painting is a battle between my attempt to stay focused on the task at hand and these active interruptions.

The paintings are full of activities which pop out: line drawn, neon rollerblades in pairs, the Wu-Tang Clan logo, and a numerous flamingos. These represent the thoughts I encountered while painting these panels. I was listening to Brandon Flower's "Flamingo," in addition to the Wu-Tang Clan's greatest hits. I reminisced about my trip to Las Vegas, which took place years ago and kept reminding myself how badly I need a vacation. I became consciously aware which thoughts crept into my mind, and I cut a flamingo shape out of cardboard to use as a stencil.

I utilized both the positive and negative shapes of the stencil and used spray paint to really capture how often I was listening to this music and how constantly I was thinking about the need for a vacation. I was reminded about the bananas my children ate for breakfast, which led to the thought of their sassy banana toothbrushes and how the toothbrushes make me laugh.

All of these wonderful, random thoughts are depicted in this painting. This is similar in style to the painting, "He Must Be Swimming in Women."

In "He Must Be Swimming in Women" the imagery reflected in the painting is an advertisement for goggles, however as it was painted as thoughts of avocados reappeared in my mind. I counted how many avocados the children ate in the past two weeks, and painted the avocados as they held focus in my mind. I was reminded, in addition to the avocados, of a conversation I had with my professor. I needed to make certain I had a record of deadlines written down so I do not fall behind in my work. I refocused on the swimmers and began to find similarities in the Pepsi advertisements compared to the goggles composition, and incorporated the inspiration into the painting, adding a Pepsi can from memory and a straw entering his mouth.

I could not recall the exact shape of the Pepsi logo, therefore I painted out various logos to reflect my finding the correct orientation. I was reminded during this process about how Pepsi can clean a barbeque grill. This notion was painted onto the canvas as well. Another constant reminder is of my Mother's morning greeting, "Have a nice day! Love ya, love ya!" I receive this greeting most mornings, and I was inspired to chronicle, on the canvas, all of the greetings I received over the past several days. I chose the hot pink lips spray painted on the surface as representation of my mother's love. "Bunnies in Heaven" is a continuation of my many thoughts swirling around my mind during painting.

"Bunnies in Heaven" is a gridded background of 72 statues of the Virgin Mary. Each Blessed Virgin is unique, but created with the same colors and materials. This reflects the act of prayer in a religious Novena. A religious Novena, in the Catholic Church, consists of praying faithfully to Mary, for many weeks, asking for guidance. I would frequent this act as a child

with my Mother. We believed this was an act of spiritual nourishment and asking a higher power for help and patience. Over the grid is a large Bugs Bunny. I find that when I pray my thoughts never remain on God, Jesus or Mary. My mind becomes blurred from movie scenes or full songs play in my head. One of my favorite movies is *Wayne's World* and as I prayed, I heard Dana Carvey, as Garth Algar ask, "Did you ever find Bugs Bunny attractive when he would put on a dress and played a girl bunny?"

I cannot expect the viewers to follow along with my thought process. I believe it would be a near-impossible feat to understand my mind. My thought patterns do not match the thought patterns of others. My audience may try and find connections to all of these symbols and painted imagery, but I know the only real connection between all of these images is my attention. The viewers receive a montage of imagery that their mind may want to put a narrative to, yet only I know the true narrative.

CHAPTER VIII: INFLUENCES

In 1957 Richard Hamilton defined his own attitude in a letter to the Smithsons, “Pop Art is: Popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low-cost, mass-produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business...¹

I often look to Pop Art as inspiration for my paintings. The bold colors and critical eye of the world are qualities I use in my work. I make reference to the layered works of Sigmar Polke, as well as the repetitive nature of the silk- screened paintings of Andy Warhol. I view painting as having the ability to be both critical and reverent towards its own tendencies and history.

During an interview with Robert Indiana, G.R. Swenson asked him if Pop Art was cynical. Pop Art does tend to convey the superb intuition that modern man, with his lost identity, submersion in mass culture, beset by mass destruction, is a man's greatest problem, and that Art, Pop or otherwise, hardly provides the Solution- some optimistic, glowing, harmonious, humanitarian, plastically perfect Lost Cord of Life (Madoff 1998,104).

I view Warhol's silk screens as a bombardment of both commercial influence and necessity. He toggled between both in the depictions of Campbell soup cans and the images of Marilyn Monroe. Where he separates the two as their own individual products or singular imagery on display for all to see... my interpretation is taking the two images and putting them together on a canvas. For example, Marilyn would share the same canvas as a Campbell's soup can.

¹ John Russell, *Pop Art a Critical History*, (On Paper 2, Art and Architecture Complete 1998), 178

Pop Art of the 1970s began as an outlet that criticized art as commodity, which in turn became one. To be an art collector is a certain status symbol. Pop Art knew it was participating in elite culture even as it criticized that culture. It brought images of art to the level of a status symbol to the consumerist. Because of this, I look to German artist Sigmar Polke frequently. His sense of subtle humor and manipulation of pictorial space through layers and various techniques can be found in my work as well.

"The multiplication of pictorial layers is connected to a desire for diverse ways of living. In Polke's work, high and low are no longer understood as a hierarchical pair. It also becomes increasingly clear that these sub-cultural niches and alternative worlds produced their own problems.²

Polke's early work suggests an ironic and distanced approach to the visual worlds of popular culture – Abstraction, reduction, and conceptual rigor dominate.³ This visual manipulation of layers is critical to how I create my paintings. While Polke's imagery may narrative a story through the presented symbolism, my work's layers depict a nonsense in routine and distractions. The images may not find any connections whatsoever, except for their presence in my thought process.

Given the nature of my work and the focus of painting a "distraction," Polke's work is a kindred artist. The qualities of painting in layers and using various materials and techniques, married together within the painting, are spontaneous and visually influence how I compose a painting. From cartoon and line drawings to an impressively rendered mock of an advertisement,

² Petra, Lange-Bendt & Dietmar Rubel, *We Petty Bourgeois!: Comrades and Contemporaries, the 1970s* (Art Pub, Book Review Digest Plus) 2011, 41

³ Petra, Lange-Bendt & Dietmar Rubel, *We Petty*, 47

the distractions and the routines found in my work present a stream of thought that has been plagued by a society. This stream of thought is focused on consumerism and commodity, by the popular, or for the shock value within society.

CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION

This series of work explores painting as routine, ritual and distraction during the painting process. Through various techniques of painting, from the low-brow animated painting to a highly visual rendering from a photograph, these layered paintings create a field of their own world. By referencing the pop artists and reflecting on their own critical eye of the world around them, I too create a visual cocktail of consumerism and its influence in the daily life. This influence is one that is captured in the digital age. These routines and habits, whether they are spiritual or necessity, influence our daily lives. While they are essential to any life, the lifestyle chosen is one influenced by status, commodity and even the lack there of.

The large scale of these paintings emphasize the brush strokes and process to properly showcase the speed of the painting. It showcases my rushed demeanor to ensure I capture the thought stream during any ritual or distraction occurring at the time.

My paintings reflect my own influences, brought on by my mundane daily routines. I cannot expect a viewer to immediately figure out that these paintings are a journal or daily log of my thought process.

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APPENDIX: PAINTINGS



